

Sleep Difficulties

Have you been concerned about inadequate or poor quality sleep lately? This could mean you have been: (a) having difficulty falling asleep, (b) waking up frequently during the night with difficulty returning to sleep, (c) waking up too early in the morning, and/or (d) experiencing unrefreshing sleep.

Having a good night's sleep is important for maintaining good health. The sleeping brain is very active, restoring body and brain cells essential for detoxing, learning, memory, concentration, problem solving and creativity. Although individuals vary normally in their need for, and their satisfaction with, sleep, it is estimated we need 8-9 hours per night. On average, most adults are getting 7.5 hours or less and one in five experience insomnia and suffer the consequences of sleep deprivation.

Consequences of Sleep Deprivation

The consequences of not getting enough sleep can have a range of short-term and longer-term problems. Sleep deprivation translates into physical, mental, relational and occupational health risks.

Short Term:

Daytime tiredness
Poor concentration
Alertness
Reactivity
Energy
Irritability
Decreased motivation and sense of control
Increased effects of alcohol

Long Term:

Anxiety about lack of sleep
Excessive fatigue
Faulty judgment/poor decision making
Longer periods of depression or relapse
Lowered immune function
High blood pressure
Reduced psychomotor skills and cognitive skills (e.g. driving)

Causes of Sleep Disturbances

Psychological stress / anxiety	Depression / other mood disorders
Trauma	Nightmares / disturbing vivid dreams
Lack of exercise	Shift work
Adolescence-related challenges	Alcohol / substance misuse
Sleep apnoea	Snoring
Circadian rhythm disorders	Neuromuscular disorders (night sweats)
Menopause	Medication
Diet	Obesity
Chronic pain	Illness / infection
Blood disorders	Ageing
Bladder control	Genetic factors (family history)
Headaches	Oversleeping
Daytime napping	Lucid dreams

What can help promote good sleep?

- Exercise regularly (not within 3 hours of going to bed)
- Cut out or cut down on stimulants, such as cigarettes, tea, coffee, chocolates, soft drinks, energy drinks, etc. (caffeine can stay in your system for up to 20 hours!)
- Reduce or cut out alcohol – avoid night caps

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Sleep Difficulties

- Avoid daytime napping – even when tired! Practice relaxation and meditation techniques at the same time every day (a good substitute for naps)
- Go to bed at the same time each night – even on weekends and days off
- Don't go to bed hungry or too full
- Avoid physical, intellectual, or emotional hyper-stimulation in the later evening
- Foods containing the amino acid Tryptophan which is converted to Serotonin in the body can assist sleep (peanuts, banana, milk)
- Find as comfortable a sleeping position as possible (body pillows are available to support upper and lower extremities and there are special pillows to promote neck comfort. Have a “going to bed routine” – try calming activities pre-bedtime-soothing music, light reading, chamomile tea, mood lighting, relaxing bath etc.
- Sexual activity can be a good aid to sleep
- Use your bed for sleep and sexual activity only. Make sure the bedroom is dark and quiet (try using earplugs or eye-masks if necessary)
- Try using essential oils and flower essences on your pillow to help induce sleep
- Massage (self or otherwise) and stretching exercises may help induce relaxation. Instead of worrying about not getting enough sleep or attempting to force yourself to sleep, gently reassure yourself at least you are getting rest if not actually sleeping
- Get up and read a non-stimulating book if you wake up or can't go to sleep after 15 minutes, at 30 minute intervals go back to bed and try to sleep again (avoid making the bed a battlefield that stirs up an emotional reaction to sleeplessness!
- Rise at the same time each day – even on weekends and days off and get out of bed as soon as you wake in the morning. Try to get some fresh air and sunshine on waking up.

Nutritional perspective

There's increasing evidence to suggest that magnesium and calcium deficiency may contribute to disturbed sleep patterns and general sleep difficulties. It may be helpful to ask your doctor to test you prior to considering pharmacological interventions for sleep difficulties.

Calcium is a natural sleep aid that can help you fall asleep and have a restful sleep. Calcium contains tryptophan, an amino acid the body uses to produce the sleep inducing and maintaining natural hormone called 'melatonin' and serotonin. These two substances are neurotransmitters that slow down nerve transmissions, relaxing your brain and body and encouraging deep sleep. Calcium is necessary for the brain to convert tryptophan into melatonin.

Magnesium deficiency could result in chronic difficulties falling or staying asleep. Other indicators of magnesium difficulty include proneness to cramps, poor hydration, cold hands and feet, tightness in the neck and shoulders, twitches in small muscles, low energy levels, irritability, etc.

Research suggests that Magnesium is central to immune-competence and plays a crucial role in natural and adaptive immunity and quality of sleep. **Magnesium is the key to the body's proper assimilation and use of calcium as well as vitamin D. Studies suggest that optimally, it is helpful to use twice as much elemental magnesium relative to the elemental calcium.**

People with long-standing digestive issues may not absorb minerals so well and may benefit from trans-dermal sprays instead. Taking a hot bath with Epsom salts (magnesium sulphate) or using magnesium oil on skin promotes good absorption of magnesium.

***Always check with your doctor before taking supplements.**

Should I seek further psychological assistance?

Behavioural treatments can be used alone or in combination with pharmacological treatments and generally involve relaxation training, cognitive therapy and stimulus control. Medications are prescribed by a medical practitioner, so see your GP for a full medical to rule out physical causes for sleep disturbances.

If taking calcium/magnesium supplements, remember: Magnesium supplements are best taken orally in a chelated form (such as citrate, ascorbate, orotate, glycinate or ideally a mix of them), in consultation with your doctor.

**Follow GP recommended dosage -- higher doses of the citrate form may cause diarrhoea; magnesium may also interact with other medications.*